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AUTHOR Poole, Wendy
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ABSTRACT

This paper uses constructivist theory as a framework to examine a transition in the supervisory relationship between teachers and administrators. The study examined a central New York school district attempting to shift responsibility for professional growth from administrators to teachers, with a focus on the meaning ascribed to new roles and relationships initiated by a new teacher-supervision program called the Supportive Supervision Model. The transition required both teachers and administrators to reconstruct meanings that comprised their cultural understandings about the teacher-administrator relationship. Data were collected through participant observation and interviews with a total of 32 teachers and 6 administrators. Despite the high level of collaboration and dialogue, multiple constructions of meaning emerged. The meaning-construction process was found to be simultaneously reflective and active, private and public, inclusive and exclusive, and natural and planned. Implications of the findings for the development of shared meaning and coordinated action in schools include: (1) meaning construction within organizations is a collaborative, rather than unilateral, process; (2) planned, focused dialogue promotes reflection on action and the development of shared meaning; (3) organizational members need to understand their personal agency within the meaning-construction process; (4) meaning construction is a continuous process; (5) perceptions of intentionality may be more important than actions and words; (6) challenges to the perspectives of others should be encouraged; and (7) the meaning-construction process has similar implications for classroom teachers engaged in curricular or instructional change. (Contains 24 references.) (LMI)

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Reconstructing the Teacher-Administrator Relationship to Achieve Systemic Change

Wendy Poole
University of Connecticut
249 Glenbrook Road, U-93
Storrs, CT 06269
(203) 486-0247
Fax: (203) 486-4028
Email: POOLE@UCONNVM.UCONN.EDU

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Constructivist theory is used as a framework for examining a transition in the supervisory relationship between teachers and administrators. The context is a school district in central New York attempting to shift responsibility for professional growth from administrators to teachers. The transition requires both teachers and administrators to reconstruct meanings that are part of their cultural understandings about the teacher-administrator relationship. The meaning construction process is described as simultaneously reflective and active, private and public, inclusive and exclusive, natural and planned. Questions are raised about the implications of the findings for the development of shared meaning and coordinated action in schools.

A constructivist image of schools has recently emerged, within which students and teachers are viewed as active constructors of their knowledge. Within educational leadership theory the constructivist perspective generally has focused on studies of school culture, and most of these have presented an integrationist perspective (Martin, 1992) which describes school administrators as cultural leaders. Few studies have focused on cultural change-in-action within schools that includes teachers as active participants in the interactive process that leads to the construction and reconstruction of meaning within schools. As a result, cultural leadership is often portrayed as the craft of manipulating cultural understandings to promote the administrator's personal vision within the school. Such an image overestimates the influence of school administrators and falsely depicts teachers as relatively passive participants in meaning construction.

This study uses a constructivist perspective to examine the roles of teachers and administrators as construcotrs and reconstructors of meaning about relationships between teachers and administrators. The context of the study is one school district's attempt to shift responsibility for professional growth from the administrator to the teacher, to break down the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and administrator, and to develop a more horizontal, collegial relationship, where both teacher and administrator contribute as equals to the common purpose of improving instruction for students. The transition required both teachers and administrators to reconstruct meanings that were part of their cultural understandings about how teachers and administrators relate to one another. What can we learn about meaning construction and reconstruction in school settings from this example of cultural transition?

CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

Constructivism has part of its foundation in the construct theory of Kelly (1955) who described humans as creating meaning from facts and constructing theories or assumptions about the world that then guide behavior in relation to the world. According to Anderson (1990), these assumptions about the world "act in effect as 'inner eyes' with which we look through our physical eyes upon reality" (p. 38), causing us to "see" certain events and to ignore others. Constructivists, then, refute the assumption that organizations can be viewed as single, objective realities. Rather, organizations are perceived as being comprised of multiple realities that are highly subjective and socially constructed.

According to constructivists, it is meaning that gives rise to behavior. Fullan (1991) argued that teachers and administrators develop subjective realities about the schools in which they work and therefore they must create meaning about planned change in order to successfully engage in the change process. In the case of teachers and administrators who are attempting a transition from hierarchical to non-hierarchical relationships, each must make sense of the change through their constructed reality of the organization.

Within constructivist theory, meaning construction is a dialectic process in which previous constructions of reality influence interpretations of new experiences and these new experiences influence the construction of reality. Individuals continuously test their assumptions and may confirm those assumptions and assimilate new information (Piaget, 1952) or may revise or accommodate (Piaget, 1952) their assumptions in light of new evidence. Similarly, Mezirow (1981) describes a process of "perspective transformation" in which "disorienting dilemmas" result in the examination

and revision of "specific assumptions and beliefs about oneself and others until the very structure of assumptions becomes transformed" (p. 8). These disorienting dilemmas are learning opportunities.

Constructivists describe adult learning as the reconstruction or transformation of previously constructed knowledge (Brew, 1993; Candy 1982; Kolb, 1984; Merriam, 1987; Mezirow, 1981; Sheckley, Allen, & Keeton, 1990). Candy (1982) distinguishes between "learning by construction--which we might call *forming* meanings, values, skills, and strategies and reconstruction--which means *transforming* meanings, values, skills, and strategies" (p. 64). Reconstruction is a recursive process as well. For example, Kolb (1984) describes knowledge as "a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted" (p. 38). The reconstruction of meaning, according to Merriam (1987), is a pervasive process in the learning of adults. If so, then meaning construction for adults is primarily a reconstructive process.

Meaning construction (or reconstruction) is both an individual and a social process. That is, the individual who constructs meaning is embedded within a social environment that interacts with the individual. Kolb (1984) describes meaning construction as a "reciprocally determined transaction between person and learning environment" (p. 36). Likewise, Sheckley, Allen, and Keeton (1990) describe a recursive interaction between learner and environment.

The interaction between individual and environment in the construction of meaning is further elaborated in the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Becker & McCall, 1990; Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1992; Habermas, 1884, 1987; Mead, 1938; Perinbanayagam, 1985). From this perspective, individuals are agents who act upon the social environment in ways that are

consistent with their interpretations of reality, and these interpretations of reality are, in turn, influenced by interpretations of others' realities. Blumer (1969) described three premises of symbolic interactionism: (1) "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them"; (2) "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows"; (3) "These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 2). Although considerable attention has been given to the first premise, that individuals construct reality, little attention has been given to the second premise, and even less to the third. This paper focuses on the second and third premises--the interactive and interpretive processes in which interpretations of the meanings and intentions of others are incorporated into meaning construction.

Within social environments individuals engage in reflection within two different dimensions: self-reflection, "a complex dialectic between a reflective and articulatory self" (Perinbanayagam, 1985, p. 25), as well as reflection about the actions of others. Individuals, then, simultaneously test hypotheses about reality and reflect upon the evidence that may confirm or disconfirm those hypotheses, and they also interpret the actions of others. Perinbanayagam (1985) describes meaning as the interpretation of acts of significance that are "produced between reflective actors through discursive acts" (p. 20) in which both the initiator and the receiver "take the role of the other" (p. 12) and respond to the constructed intentionality of the other as a means of interpreting the significance of the act. Both the initiator and the respondent place limits on the acts of others thus, "in such a dialectic, there are two acts of measurement, one by the initiator and the other by the

respondent, and two standpoints, thus making the emergence of meaning a complexly tentative and contingent phenomenon" (p. 25-26).

The interpretive process may or may not lead to a social, or common, construction of reality. McCall & Becker (1990) describe the interpretive process as a series of negotiations, each of which becomes the initial condition that influences subsequent negotiations: "Social events don't just happen all at once, but rather happen in steps: first one thing, then another, with each succeeding step creating new conditions under which all the people and organizations involved must now negotiate the next step" (p. 6).

Individuals are active interpreters of the environment and their behaviors are constant adaptations to their interpretations of the environment. Since individuals are acting upon their personal constructions of social situations, there are limitations on the degree to which meaning is shared from one situation to the next and limitations on the degree to which behavior is common. Nevertheless, the development of common or shared meanings in social settings, such as organizations, creates a foundation for cooperation or joint action between individuals. To the extent that individuals believe that they share common interpretations joint action is possible.

From the constructivist viewpoint, meanings related to social relationships are negotiated through daily interactions between members of the organization as they engage in the interpretive process. As organizational members develop common meanings about relationships these may form part of the "deep structure" of organizational culture (Schein, 1985), assumptions that are difficult to change because they are often "not explicit, discussed, or understood, but buried at the level of unstated assumptions" (Fullan, 1991, p. 42). In order to change tacit beliefs and assumptions

organizational members must become aware that they exist and then engage in the process of meaning reconstruction. For example, within a school setting, a significant change in the rules about how teachers and administrators interact in the supervision and evaluation of teachers may provide a disorienting dilemma that will initiate the interpretive process that may lead to perspective transformation or meaning reconstruction.

This paper explores the application of constructivist theory to the issue of relationship transition within the context of a school district which undertook to reconstruct the teacher-administrator relationship. The implementation of a new model of teacher supervision and evaluation created the conditions which led teachers and administrators to make their personal meanings explicit and to engage in collaborative meaning construction about the teacher-administrator relationship. Despite the high level of collaboration and dialogue, multiple constructions of meaning emerged. For some, it led to reconstructions of meaning about teacher-administrator relationships, while for others it tended to confirm existing constructions. The individual and collaborative components of the construction process, then, had implications for the degree of joint action that was possible and for the nature and level of conflict encountered in the change process. There may be lessons to be gleaned by educators from constructivist learning theory about how to structure productive, collaborative, work environments.

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on the construction of meaning related to new roles and relationships initiated by a new program for teacher supervision and

evaluation called The Supportive Supervision Model.[1] Questions that were posed included: What meanings do teachers and administrators construct about the teacher-administrator relationship within the new supervision and evaluation model? Do teachers and administrators share common understandings about this relationship? How do individual and common understandings develop?

Data were collected between 1991-1993 during a two-year piloting of Supportive Supervision, and during follow-up visits conducted in the spring and fall of 1994. In part, data collection consisted of participant observations during faculty meetings, department meetings, staff development meetings, school-community meetings, union meetings, training sessions, and pilot-team meetings. In addition, multiple interviews were conducted with a cohort of 22 educators--six teachers and one administrator at the K-2 level; five teachers, five teacher/department chairs, and two administrators at the high school, two district-level administrators, and one teacher/district-level administrator. These participants, with the exception of one district-level administrator, participated in the pilot activities during the first two years of the study. Each participant was interviewed at least twice and some as many as five times during the three-year period. Interviews generally were 40-60 minutes in length. As data collection progressed, 10 other teachers (five at the K-2 school; five at the high school) who were not involved in the pilot project, were identified through purposive sampling and interviewed, some on multiple occasions. In September 1993, six teachers (three in the K-2 school, three in the high school) were added to the study in order to gain the perspective of those whose first engagement with Supportive Supervision

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[1] This study was partially funded by the the Spencer Foundation and by OERI.

came after full implementation. Thus, a total of 38 teachers and administrators were interviewed. Of the 32 teachers and teacher/department chairs, 18 were women, and of the six administrators or teacher/administrators, two were women.

SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION

The Lawrence School District in central New York serves approximately 3600 students within a geographically large rural region.[2] The district has earned a reputation for excellence as measured by student scores on state achievement tests. Lawrence school district members are proud of their success and they are determined to maintain high standards. The district's mission of "Excellence of Opportunity and Instruction" is symbolic of the district's commitment to quality education. Leaders within the district perceive professional development as a means to achieve continuous instructional improvement.

James Miller was appointed superintendent in 1982 and he soon became frustrated by the perceived unwillingness of some teachers to participate in professional development activities that were not mandated by the district administration, and he coined the expression, "Doing nothing is not an option" to communicate to teachers his expectation that they would actively pursue professional development activities. He perceived that many teachers were passive about their professional growth and content to allow others to plan professional development activities for them. In contrast, his vision was that <u>all</u> teachers would emulate what <u>some</u> teachers were doing already and assume ultimate responsibility for their professional growth.

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[2] Pseudonyms have been used for both the school district and for individuals within the school district.

Miller respected those teachers who continually upgraded their knowledge and skills and who experimented with new instructional strategies in their classrooms. He observed that "we have teachers that have demonstrated, repeatedly, outstanding ability to reflect and change and get better and do outstanding work," and he wanted this sense of personal responsibility and commitment to continuing professional growth to become the norm for all teachers within the district.

First, the organization had to establish an expectation for continuing professional growth. In Miller's view, it was teacher evaluation that established expectations about what teachers were responsible for, and accountable for, within the district. He criticized the traditional teacher evaluation system because it focused on the continuous reaffirmation of teacher competence and failed to set an expectation of continuing growth and improvement. Miller charged the Professional Staff Development Committee (PSDC) to develop a teacher evaluation system that would promote professional growth within a safe and nonthreatening environment. The PSDC, with representation of teachers from each school in the district, building-level administrators, central office administration, and the teachers union, was responsible for staff development of district teachers.

After three years of reviewing research, visiting sites with exemplary teacher evaluation models, and gathering input and feedback from district teachers and administrators, the PSDC developed The Supportive Supervision Model. The details of Supportive Supervision are described in a previous article (Poole, 1994) however, to summarize briefly, the model consists of three "options" for teacher supervision and evaluation: (1) under Directive Supervision non-tenured teachers work closely with their administrator, collaboratively developing professional growth goals and

collaboratively assessing progress toward those goals; (2) Intensive Supervision is a highly structured and collaborative remediation process for teachers who are identified by their administrators as at risk of being terminated; (3) Self-directed Supervision, the central focus of the model, involves the majority of teachers--those who are competent and tenured. Self-directed Supervision gives the teacher responsibility for developing short-term or long-term goals for professional growth and a plan for achieving those goals. Teachers self-direct their professional growth and they account for their progress toward achieving those goals by self-evaluating their progress at mid-year and again at year-end. Teachers are encouraged, but not required, to select someone to serve as a cognitive coach (Costa & Garmston, 1985) throughout the growth process. The administrator's role is described as that of facilitator and possibly coach, if the teacher invites the administrator to serve as her/his coach.

Part of Superintendent Miller's vision of professional educators involved teachers and administrators collaborating to achieve improved instruction for students. He denounced the traditional hierarchical relationships as they presently existed between teachers and administrators--relationships that created a "we/they" mentality and often hampered the organization in meetings its goals, especially those related to instructional improvement and enhanced learning for students. He spoke about the need to "break down the we/they barriers." He believed that teachers and administrators, alike, needed to come to view themselves as part of the same struggle, as educators who each contributed to the organization through different, but equally important means. In his remarks at a district-wide staff development day, Miller described the Supportive Supervision Model as one that would "break down walls and labels" and "forge new relationships."

Supportive Supervision was intended to break down traditional hierarchical relationships between administrators and teachers and to create new relationships founded upon mutual trust and support. The teacher would assume responsibility for professional growth and instructional improvement. The administrator would become less the inspector of teacher competence and more a facilitator of teacher growth. Supportive Supervision implied a significant change in the teacher-administrator relationship and it required organizational members to reconstruct meanings that were part of their culture.

Teachers and administrators engaged in individualized processes of meaning construction which resulted in multiple realities. Some of those perspectives are presented in this paper. Because of the impossibility of capturing in these few pages the richness of meaning construction, stories, quotes, or condensations of dialogue have been selected because of they were deemed to provide poignant snapshots of the meaning construction process.

TEACHERS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEACHER-ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONSHIP

Teachers constructed meaning about teacher-administrator relationships in a variety of ways, using information from a wide range of sources.

Administrator Trustworthiness and Teacher Vulnerability

It was understood by both teachers and administrators that trust between the teacher and his/her supervisor or coach would be essential to the success of Supportive Supervision. Early in the pilot project many teachers expressed apprehension about whether all teachers would feel comfortable about sharing their instructional weaknesses with their administrators:

> It's just a feeling that they [teachers] have. When I sit down with my administrator and say "this, and this, and this", is it going to be a safe thing to do? Or is it going to be twisted around to be insubordinate, or whatever. That kind of thing. Because a lot of people don't have that trust base built. And it's not easy for them to do. Because there still is a distinction between administration and the teaching population. And there's a world of difference in many people's eyes.

Not all teachers believed that trust of administrators was an issue. A few teachers explained that their involvement in the pilot project had resulted in more positive perspectives about the teacher-administrator relationship. One teacher reported having experienced "a philosophical change that they're not 'the boss'; I just feel like they're on the same side of the table but in a different seat."

After teachers received official permission to self-select coaches, the trust issue diminished in importance, however, it continued to emerge during interviews. One teacher was particularly expressive about this issue:

> When you put down on paper and put in your files something that is what I consider my attackable areas . . . I have no defense because those are the areas I am weak in. . . . If anybody from the administration ladders wants to attack me, I'm wide open. . . . I feel like I'm pasting myself up for knife throwers. . . . Supportive Supervision includes provisions for the person who is being supervised, supposedly to be moved to intense support, intense evaluation and eventually into the process of being dismissed for incompetence. . . . I'm not so stupid as to note you can't get rid of a good teacher if you don't like him.

Teacher vulnerability--the potential for teachers to become victims of administrative misuse of power--was an important factor within the trust issue.

Part of this vulnerability stemmed from administrator turnover. There were turnovers in the superintendenency and in the K-2 principalship during the study, and the high school principal was within a few years of retirement. These real and anticipated turnovers in administration created speculation about how new and prospective administrators might respond to the non-traditional roles of Supportive Supervision. This was especially a

concern among teachers in special areas such as art and music who interpreted that their administrators considered their programs to be more expendable than more "academic" programs. These teachers often perceived their programs, and therefore their teaching positions, to be highly vulnerable to administrator turn-over: "What I'm concerned about is not the present staff or the present situation. It's what happens when [the current principal] retires. . . . I've had principals hired on top of me that killed programs." Indeed, teachers generally agreed that, "The true test [of the Supportive Supervision Model] will come when we replace our superintendent and our principals."

Power and Control in Supportive Supervision

Teachers' constructions of their experiences with Supportive Supervision varied considerably. Some teachers emphasized their new power to direct their professional development and they described Supportive Supervision as a "teacher-teacher model" in which administrators performed an indirect supporting and facilitating role.

Other teachers interpreted their experiences as meaning that administrators were continuing to exercise hierarchical control over teachers. For instance, when one principal in the study required teachers to submit their growth plans for the principal's feedback, some teachers objected, posing arguments such as:

> I don't feel that that is appropriate. Those goals are my goals and its nobody's business to evaluate my goals. The whole purpose of Supportive Supervision was to be safe and supportive and it was to be ownership and autonomy for the teacher. If the administrator is approving or disapproving of certain goals then this is taking away the teacher's ownership of those goals.

Some teachers interpreted such incidents as evidence that administrators held uncompromising positions and that they were either

unwilling or unable to let go of traditional hierarchical interaction patterns. Others, such as the union president, perceived these incidents as temporary slippages that were to be expected as administrators struggled with their new role. From his perspective:

> We never really realized [administrators] were going to be impacted the most. One of the things they have to do is they need to keep going back--this is a traditional role of an administrator; this is the new role of administrator. Do they weave back and forth together or are they separate, or is this one stronger than this one?

The union president interpreted what appeared to be inconsistency between "espoused theory" and "theory-in-use" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) as behavior that was consistent with the process of reconstructing meaning.

Administrator Trust of Teachers

Teachers examined the full range of their experience within the organization to assist them in making meaning of the new teacher-administrator relationship. When asked to explain how, if at all, Supportive Supervision was affecting their relationship with administrators, many teachers reported experiences that did not appear to be directly connected to Supportive Supervision. For example, one teacher explained how only members of the school's Crisis Management Team were apprised of sensitive information about particular students who were experiencing personal and family crises because of the principal's concern that some teachers might not maintain professional confidentiality. A colleague commented, "If you can't trust me with the information then write me up and say you can't trust me. But meanwhile, you should trust me with the information because I need that to function."

> Another teacher told the following story:
> I'm an economics teacher, and . . . reading the paper helps me do my job. It's part of my job. I read the paper every day. I often read it during my planning period. . . . But a while back, an administrator noticed that I was reading the paper on my planning periods, and he

> gave me cafeteria duty. Because I was reading the paper, he figured I had nothing constructive to do and he put me in the cafeteria.

An elementary teacher explained how her administrator's behavior at a curriculum meeting demonstrated the administrator's distrust of teachers:

> [Our principal] came to the meeting and she ran the meeting, and it was when she said that the discussion was cut and that's when the subject was changed. . . . She kept interrupting and putting in like her own views, you know what I mean. It made me mad. . . . You know, we're in here with a classroom, we're doing this stuff, let us talk about it and we'll solve the problem. Trust us as professionals. We will come to a consensus and do what's right for the kids.

These stories were indicators of teachers' perception that administrators did not trust them to be professional about their work. This perception lead to teacher skepticism about the prospects for developing more collegial relationships between teachers and administrators. A continuing theme raised by teachers at PSDC and pilot team meetings was, "Administrators will need to trust us."

Perceived Honesty and Risk-Taking Among Colleagues

Many teachers interpreted the actions of other teaches to mean that their colleagues were less than honest about their instructional weaknesses or that colleagues were selecting "safe" goals that did not pose any risk to their credibility as teachers. The experience of one teacher was particularly revealing:

> We had a faculty meeting to sit down and talk over our goals with each other. You know, some of the colleagues I've talked to, the answer is, "Well, don't put down anything that's sensitive. Just put down what you know you're going to be able to do." And I'm going, "So we're not really serious about this are we?" I can also see an awful lot of other colleagues that are not being as open and honest about it and they're hedging their bets. [Some of the goals] amount to Mickey Mouse goals--goals that obviously don't really get to the depth of your teaching situation.

Others expressed similar views, explaining their belief that some teachers would engage in minimum compliance:

> My skepticism remains that a lot of people will not be doing it [the Supportive Supervision procedure] for the right reasons. . . . But rather to meet the requirements of the paperwork, without meeting the obligation and the spirit of professional improvement.

Another teacher explained that some of her colleagues thought about Supportive Supervision from the perspective of impression management, "For many people it's the documentation that is becoming the most important thing. As long as you look good, you don't actually have to be good." Teachers were interpreting the actions of their colleagues as messages about how their colleagues interpreted their responsibilities within Supportive Supervision.

Traditional Perceptions About the Teacher's Role

Some teachers had difficulty accepting the more collegial relationship between teachers and administrators. They had become accustomed to a hierarchical relationship with administrators and tended to defer to administrative authority. These teachers were comfortable carrying out the directions that administrators gave to them and tended to believe that "everybody needs a boss." From one teacher's perspective:

> I still like am an 'old school' guy. I think there's some validity to my boss. I should have a boss, and my boss should be an administrator. I believe that in my heart for some reason. . . . I still would like to see something a little more formal from them.

For these teachers, it was inconceivable that teachers could or should be held responsible and accountable for self-managing and self-evaluating their professional growth.

One teacher explained, "There are some people that have been teaching a long time and they're not going to go against the administrator." The implication was that teachers perceived pressure from some of their colleagues to conform to traditional roles. The fact that some teachers held traditional perspectives made it more difficult for other teachers to behave in

ways that were consistent with the new image of the teacher-administrator relationship. They could not count on these colleagues for support if they chose to challenge an administrator.

ADMINISTRATORS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEACHER-ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONSHIP

Congruence with Leadership Style

Both principals involved in the study reported a high level of comfort with Supportive Supervision, and both indicated that this approach matched their personal leadership styles. The high school principal interpreted that Supportive Supervision added to, rather than detracted from, her power as a leader because "I know more about what goes on in the building than I ever did."

Accountability for Decisions and for Teacher Competence

Administrators perceived that "I'm responsible for what goes on in my building." The superintendent explained that, legally, "administrators are accountable for decisions" and "nothing has happened to absolve the Board of Education or the Superintendent of Schools or the building administrator from their legal responsibilities." He perceived Supportive Supervision as having to meet the dual needs of supporting teacher growth and "providing us with the legal documentation for removing those who are employed and shouldn't be here."

Related to the accountability issue was the particular concern among administrators about the legal and organizational implications of Supportive Supervision for the tenuring process. The superintendent reported that the status of non-tenured teachers had become a matter of debate among administrative team members. Some believed that cognitive coaching (Costa

& Garmston, 1986) could and should be used to elicit information about the beginning teacher's knowledge base, to support the teacher's construction of knowledge, and to develop self-directed behaviors in preparation for the Self-Directed option of the Supportive Supervision Model after tenure was achieved. Other administrators preferred to use the effective teaching criteria as a set of core competencies to be used by the administrator in evaluating the non-tenured teacher's performance. According to the superintendent:

> I guess part of it is our administrative team is a bit traditional and doesn't know quite how to do [cognitive coaching]. They have the training but haven't really put it into practice, and I think that's something that we will be working more with in several years.

Teachers' Skill Levels Related to Supportive Supervision Tasks

Administrators tended to question whether teachers possessed the skills and experience necessary to carry out the tasks related to Supportive Supervision. Would teachers be able to establish appropriate goals? Would teachers run out of ideas or alternative solutions to problems? Would they know how many goals could be reasonably accomplished in a year? One of the principals directly involved in the study recalled an experience with teacher in another district who had established an unrealistic number of goals and had been devastated when she had failed to achieve all of them. The principal wanted to ensure that this did not happen with her present staff. Therefore, she believed that she needed to counsel teachers about the goal-setting process and this, she believed, could be accomplished by requiring teachers to submit their goals to her for feedback. Some teachers, as explained earlier, objected to this, perceiving it as controlling behavior.

Teacher Trustworthiness

Another factor influencing administrator interpretations about their relationship with teachers was the degree to which administrators trusted teachers to endorse the spirit of continuous improvement. One

administrator reported that teacher reflection was a positive outcome of Supportive Supervision:

> The process of having to be honest with yourself about what you are accomplishing with students, about having to put down on paper what you hope to accomplish--it almost doesn't matter what you put down on paper. The fact that you're somewhere between encouraged and forced to go through this process with yourself has to make you mindful of a whole lot of things you could get away with not thinking about before.

This administrator perceived that reflective behavior on the part of teachers provided evidence that teachers could be trusted to be reflective about their abilities as teachers and about their attitudes toward their work.

Administrators perceived that some teachers were not trustworthy. According to the superintendent:

> I think there are those members of the teaching staff who are dodging [Supportive Supervision] as best they can. . . . Their goals are not demanding, they're not stretching, and probably they've got the goals achieved about the second week of school. The rest of the time they're unobserved and they really feel like they're beyond administrative supervision. We don't have very much of that. I just don't know what that does for the staff support of Supportive Supervision if people are allowed to skate their way through it.

Administrators who were concerned about teacher trustworthiness pointed to documented evidence that at least one teacher in the district had established the single goal to "survive the year." This was perceived by administrators as a contemptuous act aimed at avoiding substantive engagement in Supportive Supervision. The implication was that it might be incumbent upon administrators to ensure that all teachers established appropriate goals. (Readers will recall that some teachers had accused administrators of engaging in controlling behavior related to goal-setting.)

One measure of teacher trustworthiness was the degree of teacher compliance with Supportive Supervision procedures. The K-2 principal reported that all teachers had established professional growth goals and were

pursuing those goals. The high school principal reported that two teachers (out of a staff of 60) did not submit their goals. The principal explained how she responded to the two teachers who did not submit growth plans early in the school year: "In January when I asked [teachers in general] about their mid-year evaluation reports . . . the end result was that they produced some goals, and they did do their mid-year reviews." The reminder about outcomes and deadlines for which teachers were responsible served as a message that she expected teachers to fulfill their responsibilities.

This same administrator reported that her response to these reticent teachers was being challenged by other teachers:

> So a couple of guys getting away with bull shit, I mean, who cares? I could probably play games and win the battles, but I don't have the time. Some [other teachers] come in and talk to me about it and I refuse to let them hold me completely responsible. It's like, "Well, where are you in this? What are you gonna do about it?" They know they have a share in that responsibility and sometimes they come up with some things they can do.

This administrator's message was, "Teachers have as much responsibility as the principal for creating expectations about appropriate teacher behavior." This action was interpreted by some teachers as an abrogration of her traditional responsibility as an administrator. Others perceived it as an indication of the emerging relationship between teachers and administrators--a relationship based upon the assumption that "we're all in this together."

MEANING CONSTRUCTION AS A PLANNED PROCESS

The Supportive Supervision Model was piloted during a two-year period from 1991-1993. Each school-level administrator (and one district-level special area administrator) recruited a team of five or six teacher volunteers to participate in the pilot project. In addition, the school pilot teams collectively formed a district pilot team which met several times

during the first pilot year, including orientation sessions, Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1985) training sessions, and feedback sessions. The district pilot team met once during the second pilot year.

The District Pilot Team

At district pilot team meetings, pilot participants provided evaluative feedback to the PSDC about the Supportive Supervision process and issues that were related to the process. Various perspectives were publicly expressed at these meetings, including those of teachers and administrators. Issues such as the selection of coaches, adequate and effective time to meet with coaches, and the administrator's role in goal setting were raised by participants.

Pilot team members frequently explored perspectives through dialogue. At one district pilot team meeting in which the issue of the administrator's role in goal setting was debated, the following arguments and queries were presented:

Teacher 1: Who decides whether goals are acceptable and whether goals have been met?

PSDC Chair: Good question. Who decides?

Teacher 2: The minute somebody tells you about the integrity of your goals you lose the trust. The coach and you have to come to an agreement over time.

Administrator 1: Goals are established between teacher and coach. My understanding is that the administrator may work at developing the goals.

PSDC Chair: We may have moved beyond that.

Administrator 2: All we may need to do is sign.

Teacher 3: Is that contrary to autonomy?

PSDC Chair: It's a courtesy issue. The administrator should know what the goals are.

Teacher 3: That's if we keep the administrative role. It seems we've moved beyond it. The administrator has become a facilitator.

Administrator 3: Somewhere the administrator needs to see the goals in order to be able to help the teacher.

Teacher 3: What I'm hearing is that someone needs to check and approve the goals. That bothers me.

Teacher 4: We're talking about changing some roles. Is that something we are free to do? Is the administrator in charge? They're responsible.

In this example, and many others like it, teachers and administrators explored each other's interpretations and intentions. Participants did not emerge from such discussions with identical perspectives, but they did gain a clearer understanding about how others interpreted their actions and perspectives. Dialogue provided important feedback that was incorporated into the meaning construction process. Dialogue raised the participants' level of reflection about their interpretations.

The Professional Staff Development Committee

Members of the PSDC, during their bi-weekly meetings, frequently engaged in dialogue based upon feedback from the district pilot team. Several members of the PSDC were teachers or administrators who participated in the pilot project and they raised many of the issues which were discussed at the district pilot team meetings or issues that were significant within specific schools. The PSDC discussed, at length, possibilities for resolving these issues.

For example, on more than one occasion, PSDC members discussed the administrator's role in goal-setting--an issue that had been raised at a district pilot team meeting and again by a pilot team teacher who wrote a letter to the PSDC asking: "Whose goals are they? What is the administrator's role in goal-setting?" Here is an example of the dialogue that occurred:

Chair: We want to avoid the parent-child relationship that requires the teacher to get approval for their goals. However, at the same time, it makes sense to have the goals coincide with the building goals. So the administrator should know what the goals are.

Teacher 1: The principal should initial the goals as a sign that they are aware of what they are. It does not mean approval, but awareness. And if the goals are misdirected, then [the

administrator] can use her skills to help us redirect--but as a facilitator.

Administrator 1: But in terms of assessment of goals, I shouldn't be doing that.

Teacher 2: I can see some people setting frivolous goals. And no one says, "This isn't appropriate?"

Administrator 2: Don't take [administrators] out of the picture.

Administrator 1: I don't think we've done that.

Superintendent: The administrator's responsibility will be to maintain the right to do more than just sign. Most of the time, however, that will be all that is necessary. It may be that there is a building goal or need that was not addressed. The administrator will add that. It's joint decision making. There has to be room for both sides to be involved.

Teacher 1: The administrator has to be able to let go. It's like teaching someone to ride a bicycle. You need to hold on for a while, but eventually you have to let go or they'll never learn to ride on their own.

Perhaps because the PSDC was a decision making body, rather than serving an advisory role like the district pilot team, there were more instances where common understandings resulted in formal plans for joint action. For instance, at a later meeting the goal-setting issue was raised again, and PSDC members decided that teachers would "share" their goals with their building administrator upon the administrator's request, but the teacher would maintain ownership of the goal-setting process.

Despite the high level of openness and honesty between teachers and administrators at the pilot team meetings and PSDC meetings, participants sometimes reported frustration about the limitations of the dialogue. For example, one PSDC member made the following statement:

> I keep asking myself, 'What will happen when teachers want something different from the superintendent?' [The superintendent] was at the [PSDC] meeting the other day and when somebody said something that he didn't agree with he became very vocal and pushy until things came around to what he wanted. When some of us talked about the need to have time to meet with our supervisors, he acted as if we were making excuses.

The teacher did not publicly share this perception at the PSDC meeting and he later explained why: "[The superintendent] can be very intimidating. I've seen him bully people before." This example illustrates the tendency of individuals to continue to interpret the intentions of others based upon traditional cultural norms related to roles and power. When those interpretations were not shared, there were no opportunities for others to challenge them.

DISCUSSION

Teachers and administrators engaged in individualized processes of meaning construction that led to the development of multiple meanings. The construction process was simultaneously reflective and active, private and public, inclusive and exclusive, natural and planned. Each of these characteristics will be discussed in turn.

Reflection and Action

Individuals constructed meaning by reflecting upon new information and experiences in relation to sets of assumptions or mental models that they had constructed from prior experience. Thus, the teacher who reported having experienced "principals hired on top of me that killed programs" hypothesized that he needed to be concerned about relationships with future, as well as current, administrators. In this situation, the teacher was "assimilating" information (Piaget, 1952) to fit his existing mental model or, as Argyris and Schon (1978) would describe it, he was engaging in "single-loop learning." On the other hand, there were examples where individuals demonstrated evidence of what Piaget (1952) calls "accommodation," or Mezirow (1994) calls "perspective transformation." Such was the case with the teacher who reported "a philosophical change that [administrators are]

not 'the boss'." These changes in assumptions occurred when disconfirming evidence compelled the individual to alter assumptions within his/her mental model.

Individuals sometimes encountered disconfirmations during their attempts to articulate their perspectives. Sheckley (1994) explains that disconfirmations of basic assumptions may be detected by the individual in one of two ways--through observation or through action. Within this study, disconfirmation through action sometimes came in the form of the attempt to express one's perspective. The individual's act of attempting to express her/his point of view was either a confirming or disconfirming experience. Disconfirmation became apparent when, in the course of dialogue, a participant would immediately follow a statement of perspective with another statement like "That's not really what I mean" or "I don't know how to say what I mean." Thus, the act of attempting to express one's meaning was, itself, part of the meaning construction process. Vocalizations, although stated as assertions, were often tentative expressions of meaning intended to test hypotheses.

Participants also used the vocalizations and behaviors of others in the construction of meaning. For example, the teacher who solicited advice from his colleagues about what kinds of goals he should establish and who received the response, "Don't put down anything that's sensitive," later reported a sense that "We're not really serious about [setting goals related to areas that need improvement]." Likewise, the teacher whose administrator assigned him to cafeteria duty because he was reading the newspaper during his planning period, interpreted this as meaning that his administrator "figured I had nothing constructive to do." These are examples of what Freire

(1970) described as the act of "naming," and they provide indicators of individuals' constructions of reality.

Individuals constructed personal meanings using previously constructed mental models, interpretations of ongoing experiences, and interpretations of the meanings of others gathered through observation of their actions, including vocalizations. They tested tentative meanings or hypotheses through their own actions and vocalizations, and they confirmed or revised their mental models based upon responses that their hypothesis-testing behavior evoked. Vocalizations, then, were not necessarily representations of rigid mental models. More often, they provided glimpses of meaning construction-in-action.

Dialogue, as engaged in by participanats in the study, differs from Senge's (1990) definition of dialogue as "the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'" [emphasis added]. Instead, participants in the study engaged in dialogue in such a way that assumptions and intentions were revealed and examined. This form of dialogue is similar to what Kegan (1995) describes as discourse that creates a "context for transformation" (p. 4). For participants in the study, focused dialogue was an opportunity to reflect upon their personal meanings and those of others, and to test hypotheses that either confirmed or disconfirmed their assumptions. Through this process, individuals explored and clarified personal meanings as well as those of others.

Private and Public Meaning Construction

Meaning construction may remain relatively private. Participants in the study made decisions about whether or not they would disclose their interpretations of others' behaviors and vocalizations, and they were selective about how much to disclose and to whom. An example of this

occurred when one PSDC member reported his perception that the superintendent had been "very vocal and pushy" during a particular PSDC meeting. Although this committee member often vocalized his perceptions and challenged the interpretations of others at these meetings, he chose not to express this particular perception at this particular meeting. His additional comment that "[the superintendent] can be very intimidating" provides a clue about why he chose not to disclose this interpretation. His perception of the greater political risk associated with challenging his superintendent as opposed to challenging another member of the committee led to his conscious choice not to disclose. As a result, the superintendent may have been unaware that the teacher held this perception, the teacher may have been unaware whether others in the group shared his perception, and no one had the opportunity to challenge his perception.

In contrast, during formal and informal interactions when various perspectives or "names" became public and, thus, were open to dialogue and praxis, and thus to the expansion of "limit themes" (Freire, 1970). An example was a district pilot team dialogue about goal-setting during which individuals shared multiple perspectives about the appropriate role of the principal in the teacher's goal-setting process. Several are paraphrased below:

- Teachers may not have skills related to goal-setting, therefore administrators may need to coach them.
- Administrators are accountable for what goes on in their buildings, therefore they have a right to know what teachers' goals are.
- Administrators are accountable for building goals, therefore they have a right to approve or disapprove of teachers' goals.
- Teachers may not be honest about their instructional shortcomings, therefore administrators need to supervise teachers' goal-setting.
- Administrators are operating under a traditional hierarchical model of control; they need to let go of control and they need to trust that teachers are setting appropriate goals.

Participants engaged in behaviors that created and maintained productive dialogic conditions. Dialogue was initiated because someone voluntarily raised issues such as the administrator's role in goal-setting (e.g. "Who decides whether goals are acceptable?"). Dialogue was enabled by others who validated the initiation or invited others to respond (e.g. "Good question. Who decides?"), expressed personal perspectives or hypotheses (e.g. "The administrator should know what the goals are."), expressed their interpretations of others' perspectives and intentions (e.g. "What I'm hearing is that someone needs to check and approve the goals."), provided clues about the intent behind personal perspectives (e.g. "Somewhere the administrator needs to see the goals in order to be able to help the teacher."), asked questions that extended reflection and dialogue (e.g. "Is that contrary to [our understanding of teacher] autonomy?"), or suggested alternative solutions or answers (e.g. "All [administrators] may need to do is sign.").

When participants publicly tested hypotheses as part of their meaning construction-in-action (i.e. when they vocalized hypotheses in social settings such as meetings), it was an invitation for others to respond and to share their personal perspectives. The result was that each participant received more information upon which to construct personal meaning and participants developed a stronger degree of shared meaning which frequently led to joint action (e.g. the decision that teachers <u>owned</u> their goals, but would <u>share</u> them with administrators upon request).

<u>Inclusion and Exclusion</u>

Although meaning construction often occurred in public settings such as pilot team meetings and PSDC meetings, a limited number of organizational members were present at those meetings. In addition, there was considerable overlap among members of the various groups that

purposefully engaged in dialogue. For example, several members of the PSDC were also participants in the district pilot team. This helped to ensure the continuity and scaffolding of dialogue among the participating groups, but it also created a certain degree of exclusivity to the dialogic process.

A limited number of organizational voices were represented at these meetings and, therefore, a limited number of perspectives were incorporated into the collaborative construction of meaning. This meant that there were limiting boundaries around collaborative meanings which, in turn, limited the degree of joint action that could occur. For example, an administrator who participated in neither the PSDC nor the district pilot team was aware that teachers would self-evaluate as a result of the implementation of Supportive Supervision, but she was not aware that she should no longer engage in traditional, unilateral evaluations of teachers. When she acted upon her understanding by conducting traditional evaluations her action was interpreted by some teachers and administrators as evidence that administrators had not "bought into" the new philosophy and practice.

The PSDC expected that the representational nature of the PSDC and of the district pilot team would enable the dissemination of common understandings about Supportive Supervision and the transition in teacher-administrator relationships within the school district. However, wide dissemination of meaning did not occur. Part of the problem was that participants did not always perceive themselves as representatives of constituencies and, therefore, many did not report to non-participating peers, nor did they necessarily solicit feedback and perspectives about Supportive Supervision from non-participating peers. Therefore, limitations on communication within the broader organization acted as barriers to the development of shared meanings across the district.

Even when non-participating organizational members were aware of formal decisions, certain informal meanings that participants had constructed and internalized in relation to those decisions remained tacit. For example, as described earlier, the PSDC decided that teachers would maintain ownership of their professional growth plans and that they would share their goals with administrators upon request. In accordance with this decision, the high school principal requested that all teachers inform her about their goals. Most teachers did so by giving a copy of their goals to the principal. However, the subtlety of ownership was not understood by some teachers who reported that "we have to turn them in to the office and [administrators] keep them." This subtlety was important for helping teachers to understand how power dynamics had shifted in their new relationship and, because some did not understand this, they concluded that nothing substantive had changed in their relationship with administrators.

Some organizational members deliberately excluded themselves from the dialogic process, believing that this would send clear messages to other organizational members about their perspectives. However, it tended to have the opposite effect--it made it more likely that their perspectives would continue to be excluded from the collaborative meanings that emerged. At least some of these organizational members were keenly interested in the transition toward non-hierarchical relationships, however, they became outliers because participants in the dialogic process concluded that they were uninterested "cynics" who were "retired on the job" and whom "we're never going to reach anyway." The fact that the "cynics" were not invited to participate, in turn, confirmed their belief that "[administrators] talk about teacher participation but in the end everything is top-down."

Natural and Planned Meaning Construction

As explained earlier, teachers and administrators engaged in individualized meaning construction. This process occurred naturally, whether or not organizational members directly participated in the PSDC or in the pilot project. Thus, the construction of meaning was not a controlled process and it was inevitable that multiple meanings would emerge.

However, meaning construction was also planned to a certain degree. The PSDC made a decision to pilot Supportive Supervision and part of the reason for doing so was to elicit feedback from participants that would inform the revision of the model. This feedback was, in part, solicited via individual written narratives or responses to questionnaires. In addition, district pilot team meetings were scheduled by the PSDC as a means of bringing the participants together to share experiences, insights, and perspectives. Therefore, the PSDC invited and facilitated public dialogue that led to collaborative construction of meaning, common understandings about emerging relationships, and joint action on the part of organizational members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The results of this study have several important implications for schools as social organizations and for educational leadership in general:

- Meaning construction within organizations is a collaborative, rather than a unilateral, process. All organizational members are cultural change agents. The integrationist approach to cultural change that views school administrators as shapers of school culture may overestimate the influence of the administrator in the reconstruction process. Administrators may be able to facilitate the process of construction and

reconstruction of meaning, but they will have limited ability to control outcomes.

- Planning opportunities for focused dialogue about cultural transitions promotes reflection on action and the development of shared meaning. Dialogue promotes the articulation of perspectives and, in the process, promotes self-reflection about those perspectives. It also permits individuals to incorporate interpretations of the perspectives of others within their personal meaning construction process. Finally, it creates nonthreatening conditions in which individuals engage in productive conflict by challenging others' perspectives, and this promotes higher degrees of self-reflection. Focused dialogue, then, may increase the quantity and quality of information available for collaborative meaning construction.

It may be productive to teach organizational members how to effectively engage in dialogic behaviors when interacting with their colleagues either formally or informally. Conditions which promote dialogue between organizational members will also promote collaborative meaning construction and the development of joint action. It may also be productive to teach organizational members who participate in formal collaborative meaning construction how to effectively communicate the informal understandings that result from exploring various perspectives and intentions. To communicate only the formal outcomes of meaning construction leaves much unsaid and makes it difficult for non-participants to understand decisions at the same level as participants. Non-participants in the planned meaning construction process need to know how to ask questions that are designed to elicit clearer messages

about the informal understandings and intent that undergird formal decisions.

- Organizational members need to understand their personal agency within the meaning construction process. All members participate in the collaborative construction of meaning; even those who willfully abstain from direct collaboration in planned meaning construction are engaging in signifying acts that contribute to the construction of common understandings.
- Meaning construction is a continuous process and should be viewed accordingly. This means that actions and vocalizations will be viewed as hypothesis-testing behaviors. The actions and vocalizations of organizational members should be viewed as demonstrative of meaning construction-in-action, rather than as rigid positions. Regressions in the direction of traditional behavior should be identified and named but, whether organizational members view such regressions as "mistakes" or as evidence that "nothing will ever change" will determine whether the organization may learn and move forward.
- Perceptions of intentionality may be more important than actions and words themselves in the reconstruction of teacher-administrator relationships. Collaborative meaning construction provides opportunities for the clarification of certain interpretations of intent that might otherwise lead to nonproductive conflict. Organizational members might be well advised to adopt the stance that one of the superintendents in the study advocated for the union: "I made the union promise that when they don't like something we do or when we do something wrong, to give me time to demonstrate that what we did was a mistake and not a

conspiracy." Organizational members need to explore their mutual intentionality.

- Questioning and challenging the perspectives of others is productive behavior and should be encouraged. Questioning and challenging promotes reflection about assumptions that undergird constructions of reality and, when it leads to unmistakable evidence that disconfirms assumptions, it may bring about the reconstruction of meaning. Leaders can encourage the exploration of assumptions by: (1) repeatedly demonstrating that questioning and challenging is nonthreatening, leaders may help to develop an organizational history that supports questioning and challenging of assumptions; (2) modeling a non-defensive stance when questioned or challenged by others; (3) questioning and challenging peers and those who have traditionally possessed more power within the organization; (4) encouraging organizational members to question and challenge the assumptions of others. On the other hand, attaching negative labels to certain challenging behaviors (i.e. "unprofessional") or to individuals (i.e. "cynics") may be counterproductive to the creation of a dialogic environment.
- The meaning construction process has similar implication for teachers who are enaged in curricular or instructional change in their classrooms. Meeting with other teachers who are also engaged in the change facilitates dialogue that may lead to better articulation of teachers' goals, the construction of shared meaning, and the coordination of efforts among teachers.

The study, then, raises several questions about meaning construction in school settings:

- Can meaning construction within organizations be managed? Should it be managed? If so, by whom?
- If meaning construction should be managed but cannot be unilaterally controlled, how can we enable organizational members to collectively take charge of the meaning construction process?
- Is it possible to develop shared meanings that align organizational goals and individual goals?
- If there are specific processes and skills that facilitate the construction of shared meaning, can organizational members learn these skills?

Constructivist theory, when applied to the relationship between meaning and action within organizations, is an alternative framework for examining the teacher-administrator relationship and other relationships within schools. Looking at organizational learning through a constructivist lens makes it apparent that organizational visions and policies, by themselves, do not necessarily create an alignment of goals, assumptions, and action. Far more important is the process of meaning construction that continues after formal visions and policies have been developed and implemented. If our goal to create school environments where learning is embedded in the daily work of students, teachers, and administrators, we cannot ignore the continuous meaning construction process through which learning, or meaning tranformation, occurs. The meaning construction process is pivotal to our understanding of the relationship between individual and organizational learning.

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